



The Thanatos Syndrome

Walker Percy

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The 1990s. Euthanasia and quarantines for AIDS have become the norm. But can even this world sanction a substance that "improves" people's behavior and so reduces crime, unemployment and teen pregnancy? A riveting bestseller by the author of *The Moviegoer*.

The Thanatos Syndrome Details

Date : Published September 4th 1999 by St. Martins Press-3pl (first published 1987)

ISBN : 9780312243326

Author : Walker Percy

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, Novels

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From Reader Review The Thanatos Syndrome for online ebook

Kirk Smith says

There is a lot going on in this book and I would just throw up a lot of spoilers if I try. Suffice it to say that Walker Percy is a gentleman and he always writes a good book.

Simon Robs says

I like Walker Percy's books on whole, but this, his last novel, is rather disappointing in many ways; it does not sum nor does it edify all that came before as some final novelistic efforts do. He seems lethargic about his topics/themes even though they are quite controversial themselves i.e. euthanasia, pedophilia, social engineering, genocide and loss of self. His characters still exhibit that "southern type" thing that run throughout all his books but they are let down by the inconstancy of the task of fitting them to their dilemmas. Nothing rises to meet the onslaught of depravity that builds as his plot unravels revealing nothing at its core of foreboding. He, the book, stumbles hopelessly inert and nothing is won or settled in the end.

I've completed Percy's novels and they are, as stated summarily worthy of respect, yet biblically not the first shall be last nor last first - here his best work came first and his worst came last. He may have even been ok with that 'cause he was going rouge spirit.

Jerry says

An utterly fascinating read! great story, great characters, air of mystery, sense of humor ... my pleasant surprise of the holidays so far!

The above paragraph is something I wrote 40% of the way through the book, which I've now finished. I suppose there was no way it could have lived up to the high expectations it engendered, but I'm still giving it 3.5-to-4 stars.

Despite my generally tolerant view toward books with "disturbing" content, I have to say I was somewhat rattled by this one. I believe the author does go a bit overboard with his depictions of some of the unsavory events that transpire in this book, and I would therefore -- sadly -- not recommend *Thanatos Syndrome* to readers who are easily offended. This is a shame, actually, because the serious issues the book treats are very much worth thinking about, and I'm grateful to Walker Percy for giving us a narrative where we are forced to think about them. And I do stand by my initial assessment of *Thanatos Syndrome* in terms of the characters, the plot, and flow of the narrative. Even when things started to become disturbing, the book was still all but impossible to put down. If you can rein in your "sensitivities", the book is just too Good a Read to ignore.

Nick says

Percy managed to craft something quite different from his other novels--this has more of the feel of a suspense novel than his other writing. Dr More takes on the role of a kind of psychiatric detective. The dialogue is terse and sometimes runs for pages without the philosophical asides I found so characteristic of

the Moviegoer or Love in the Ruins. It is also far more bleak; much like Father Smith's insistence that "tenderness leads to the gas chamber," Percy makes an analogous point about the sexual revolution: free love leads inexorably to child porn. In fact, this novel strikes me as a convincing prelude to the pornification of twenty-first century media and culture, in which far-eyed dislocated selves speaking in sentence fragments "present rearward" and knuckle their way up balustrades, pongid-like, Snickers bar in hand.

I can't say I enjoy having much of the imagery of this novel in my head. As Alan Jacobs has noted, perhaps this sardonic, foul-mouthed, bourbon-drinking visionary is the one we both need and deserve.

Matthew Klobucher says

Walker Percy has deftly combined the satisfying nostalgia of a Southern Novel with the excitement and tension of a medical-disease caper. Written from the wryly amusing and common-sense perspective of Dr. Tom More, a disgraced psychiatrist with a history both of medical breakthroughs and of alcoholism and drug use, the story sets itself firmly in the superstitious and historically rooted society of southern Louisiana. As he resumes his practice, Dr. More discovers some disturbing symptoms. Following up takes him deep into a remote and bigoted aristocracy left over from the days of Slavery and will show him the dark underside of human progress: the rationalization of genocide and manipulation of personalities, the development of sexual deviancy, and the familiar appalling dream of utopia.

Angus McKeogh says

Pleasantly surprised. I'll admit I was assigned this book in a Southern Lit class at university and never read it. The best part is there's an interesting overlying story on top of the underlying literary allusions. Entertaining and strange. I really liked it. Will definitely have to read his award winner, *The Moviegoer*.

Ron Hefner says

I posted that I first read this book in 1995 and "finished" it in 2011. That's not really accurate. Actually, I've read it three times, and I'm sure I'll read it again.

I believe that Walker Percy is one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century. No other writer has been able to explore existential themes and religious / moral themes with such humor and insight. But he doesn't preach. Rather, he draws us in with memorable characters and compelling stories. And he entertains! When you finish a Percy novel, you shake your head in disbelief at the enormity of what you have just read.

I came across this book in a used paperback store in the mid-1990's. It appeared to be a thriller, concerning putting drugs in the water supply in a Louisiana town. Little did I know what I was in for.

After devouring it, I went back and read all of Percy's novels, starting with *The Moviegoer*. All are marvelous, but I believe his finest novels are his later ones: this one and *The Second Coming* (another book that I've read three times).

Don't forget his non-fiction. *Lost in the Cosmos* will have you laughing out loud, but at the same time, it contains great insight into the struggle of existentialism.

Darwin8u says

"It is not for me to say whether one should try to be happy -- although it always struck me as an odd pursuit, like trying to be blue-eyed--"

--Walker Percy, The Thanatos Syndrome.

Probably 3.5 stars. Not my favorite Walker Percy, and definitely not the one to start with. It starts with dark humor and absurdism and twists into a creepy weird horror show and slowly wades the reader back out.

I get what Percy was doing here. I really do. I get the metaphor, but ye gads, it wasn't exactly a joyride. There were parts I absolutely adored. So, if you have never read Percy, kick this one down your list. If, however, you have already read *The Moviegoer*, *Love in the Ruins*, *The Second Coming*, sure, yeah, knock your self out. Just look out. It is like eating a 7 Pot Primo pepper. Sucker is going to burn, kick, and sting.

Ultimately, Percy gives away his big point with a flashback from the crazy priest sitting in the watchtower. The mad priest and Dr. Tom More discuss modernism, psychology, and the rise of the Nazi bureaucracy in the early 20th century. The point I think Walker is trying to convey in most of his books is the Modern World, with its technologies, drugs, philosophies, etc., has kind of left us unprotected. Some of those things that seem, from a utilitarian view, to improve our lives will probably end up deadening our existence. The one institution that might be able to warn us, protect us, provide some level of comfort and security after we have been stripped bare by Modernism -- the Church -- is starved, weakened and almost unable to give us the basic rituals and nourishment we need to combat the technocrats, bureaucracies, and wicked forces that latch onto Modernism (I don't think Percy is arguing that Modernism itself is evil, simply that it efficiently plows the ground for evil seeds). Anyway, this is Percy's BIG THEME and he just hits it really hard, over and over, in this book.

"In the end one must chose--given the chance."

Brent says

Read for book club.

It had some good points, but I thought the story was disjointed the narrative voice was uncomfortable, and the ending was absurd. I was glad when it was over.

Stephen Gibbs says

"That Hideous Strength" set in Louisiana. Percy's pacing and plotting suffers, but the retrospectives on humanism's spiral into a technocratic, eugenically-minded world are prescient and very good.

Mary says

Here Percy is profound: psychologically astute and socially prescient. He knows people--the human condition, our quirks, our excuses, our dilemmas. He knows us inside and out. And in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy puts his own medical-school knowledge to work through his main character Tom More, M.D., a floundering psychiatrist, and numerous other medically-inclined characters dealing with (ahem) a syndrome.

Percy is smart--he doesn't need me to tell him so (especially, alas, post mortem). In this novel, I enjoyed not only the suspenseful story and intriguing characters (though More is a bit anemic, it seems to me) but Percy's writerly (and I'd say) wonderful way with words and ideas. In revealing his understanding of us humans, he brings to light our fear of choice, which is really a fear of ourSELVES. At one point More notes--in Percy's rich prose--this social phenomenon: "We [psychiatrists:] have mostly been superseded by brain engineers, neuropharmacologists, chemists of the synapses. And why not? If one can prescribe a chemical and overnight turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body, why take on such a quixotic quest as pursuing the sacred of one's very self?" (13). But Percy, for better or worse, is an advocate of the sacred self in all its "quixotic," troublesome, scared, unlovely, old, weak, lovely, genius forms. Again More notes, "It helps enormously when a patient can make friends with her terror, plumb the depths of her depression" (67). And quoting Jung, "There's gold down there in the darkness."

Indeed there is, and in this novel, Percy gives readers the darkness--depression, incest, infanticide, euthanasia, pedophilia--of humanity while unwaveringly holding on to the belief that this violent, turbulent, lovely life and living it as complex humans with volition is better than any novel idea or any medication that promises a quick fix to "solve" society's "problems." (Especially since, as we know, "problems" often start looking like people.)

Jennifer Grosser says

Not sure why, as an one-time English major with a brother who loved this author's books, it's taken me so long to discover Walker Percy. An amazing read. At one point near the end it got pretty disturbing, but the questions he raises about life and death are important and fascinating. I was also intrigued by one character's harangue which included this:

"These are strange times. There are now two kinds of people. This has never happened before. One are decent, tenderhearted, unbelieving, philanthropic people. The other are some preachers who tell the truth about the Lord but are themselves often rascals if not thieves . . . What a generation! Believing thieves and decent unbelievers! The Great Depriver's finest hour!"

As someone who is always searching for God OUTSIDE of specifically religious literature, I found this book just the type of thing I look for. (Disturbing content notwithstanding.)

Stephen Gallup says

This is nominally a sequel to *Love in the Ruins*, in that we have the same main character, Dr. Thomas More, and there are one or two passing references to events in the earlier book. The main connection between the two, however, is that once again More perceives something new and very unusual in the people around him -

- and apparently nobody else has the slightest interest.

I've seen reviews that call Percy's books thrillers. I don't think the level of excitement rises to that standard, because the focus is more philosophical. However, this one comes a good deal closer to being a thriller than the others. The peculiar behavior More observes turns out to be due to a heavy isotope in the drinking water, and as he investigates the matter with the able help of a distant relative named Lucy (who sort of has the hots for him), her redneck uncle, and a near-genius-level black helper named Vergil (a similar character shows up in *Lancelot*, by the way), he finds that the addition of that isotope is intentional.

People drinking the local water supply are being altered, and there's an argument to be made that the changes are beneficial. Crime is way, way down, for example (as is the ability to think critically). On the other hand, the people responsible for this, who of course are not drinking the water, manage to commit some pretty heinous crimes of their own, involving children. Can Dr. More stop them? The fact that his own credentials are none too impressive these days does not help.

I suppose the moral is that we should beware of officials with superiority complexes. And as I look at what is happening in the country today, I think Percy was ahead of his time.

Petergiauinta says

Not exactly what you'd expect from Walker Percy, and the GoodReads write-up doesn't begin to give you a sense of what this book is about (for starters, it's published in the '80s so someone should fix that blurb!), *The Thanatos Syndrome* sounds like a Ludlum novel from the get-go and reads a little like one, too, although a less-formulaic Ludlum novel penned by a far more literary author.

I read it in Nepal back in 1988, a brand-new paperback sent to me by Tom Yates that I sold off a few weeks later when I was done to a second-hand book seller in Thamel for a few rupees to buy apple pie and daal bhaat.

Today, I remember little about the novel, other than the drinking water supply of a town in Louisiana being tainted with chemicals resulting in highly sexualized behavior by otherwise not-so sexual individuals.

Pages were turned and details rapidly forgotten, and these three stars are really based on nothing more than a favorable impression that has lasted with me over the past three decades. So read it if you like. I don't care. I'd actually say it's better than *The Moviegoer*, but there's probably no one else in the world who'd agree with me. I don't know what was wrong with me when I read *The Moviegoer*, but I just did not like that book at all...

Lance Kinzer says

Re-reading all of Percy's novels this summer has been a joy, and here he is outstanding as usual. There are aspects of this book that remind me of C.S. Lewis in *That Hideous Strength* - but Percy is the more profound novelist. Percy writes of a world in which "Reason warred with faith. Science triumphed. The upshot? One hundred million dead." In a world where an odd admixture of tenderness and utilitarianism reigns, the result is moral blindness tending to unspeakable crimes (a word of warning - those crimes are described in gut wrenching detail). I give the book 4 rather than 5 stars because the last 50 pages or so become too straightforwardly didactic, when various avenues seemed available to more subtly, and I think more

effectively, develop his point by continuing to advance the storyline. Instead the conclusion felt to me a bit tacked on and forced. I wonder if Percy, nearing the end of his life, felt a need to be more explicit. I'd add that I agree with his argument, but it was not his best work as a novelist.
